United Nations A/HRC/31/NGO/169

General Assembly

Distr.: General
23 February 2016

English only

**Human Rights Council**
**Thirty-first session**
Agenda item 4
**Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

# Written statement* submitted by the Jubilee Campaign, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2016]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.16-02819(E)

Please recycle

# Interactive Dialogue with Special Rapporteur on situation of human rights in the State of Eritrea

**Human Rights and Freedom of Religion or Belief in Eritrea**

Jubilee Campaign seeks to draw the Council's attention to the domestic human rights and religious freedom situation in the State of Eritrea. This past June, the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea released a 484-page report documenting the human rights condition in Eritrea. However, because of the Eritrean government's lack of cooperation, the COI was not able to enter into the country and investigate the conditions in its entirety, but was forced to rely on the testimonies of those who have been forced to leave Eritrea. Meanwhile, human rights violations remain that must be investigated further, including the government's use of military conscripts for forced labor, government censorship, and religious persecution.

**Forced Labor**

In 2008, a Vancouver-based mining company, Nevsun Resources Ltd, broke ground for the Bisha mine located 150 km west of Asmara. The Eritrean government has a 40% stake in the company, and allegations have emerged that the government used conscripts to help build the mine.

Elsa Chyrum, Director of Human Rights Concern Eritrea and partner of Jubilee Campaign, interviewed Eritrean refugees who claimed they had worked for the military as conscripts and were forced to work at the Bisha mine. If they refused, they would be killed, tortured, or detained indefinitely. The interviewees reported that they worked in extreme heat, and conscripts were often subject to malaria, diarrhea, and collapsing. The conscripts are believed to have been provided under Segen Construction, a state-owned contractor.

The Bisha mine is not the only case of forced labor in Eritrea. Conscripts are used in other government construction sites and government-owned farms. Some conscripts report not getting paid, however in general the pay that is received is inadequate to support a family. Harsh military discipline and torture is widely reported, while women report frequent sexual abuse by the commanders.

**Government Censorship**

Eritrea has maintained its position over the years as the most censored country in the world. Less than 1% of the Eritrean population is able to go on the Internet. In addition, there are no privately-owned media outlets. All that is left in the country for media is government-run outlets that are strictly supervised. Even those who work for the government-run outlets live in fear. The government also restricts assembly, requiring public gatherings of more than 7 people to obtain a permit. Eritrea currently has 23 journalists in prison, the highest amount in all of Africa.

**Freedom of religion or belief**

Currently, only four religious denominations are officially recognized by the government of Eritrea: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, and the Roman Catholic Church. Other religious groups must register in order to practice their faith; however, the process is onerous, intrusive and seemingly inconclusive. If found practising their faith, adherents of non-recognised creeds are arrested and detained without charge or trial and can face torture or even death. In many instances those belonging to recognised groups also face repression.

In order to be registered, a religious community has to provide details of its history in the country, the particular benefit the group or religion offered, the names and personal information of the group's leaders, its assets, a description of the group's conformity to 'local culture', and a declaration of all foreign sources of funding. In reality, the process proves to be obstructive, intrusive and ultimately indefinite, as evidenced by the fact that almost a decade later and despite meeting all registration requirements, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Presbyterian Church, Faith Mission

Church, and the Baha'i faith are yet to receive official recognition. Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses have been completely stripped of their citizenship, denying them their basic rights.

Having registration, however, does not protect a religious organization from government intrusion. There have been reports that the government selects the religious leaders, controls finances, and dictates what can be taught or preached.

Not being able to register their religious organization or not wanting to submit to the government's control of their religion has caused many religious groups to meet in secret. However, if found out, those meeting are arrested and detained.

Thousands of mostly Protestant Christians are thought to be detained indefinitely, some of which are held in metal shipping containers. Although some were initially released after pledging to renounce their faith, none have been formally charged or tried and all are held pending similar denials of faith. Barring a renunciation of faith, prison terms are harsh and lengthy.

Religious persecution has also been faced by those serving in the military. Individuals have reported being punished for reading their Bible or being caught praying.

**Recommendations to the Human Rights Council:**

- Urge the Eritrean government to issue an invitation to the Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea to visit the country and investigate reports of violations of religious freedom and human rights. A proper investigation cannot be done without visiting the country.
- Urge the government of Eritrea to cease forced labor in light of Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states, "No one should be held in slavery or servitude."
- Urge the government of Eritrea to stop all cruel punishments and torture in light of Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."
- Urge the government of Eritrea to stop the arrest and detainments of those who have an opposing ideology or adhere to a certain religion in light of Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states, "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile."
- The government of Eritrea should be condemned for stripping away the citizenship of Jehovah Witnesses and urged to stop this practice in light of Article 15.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states, "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality."
- Urge the government of Eritrea to release unconditionally all prisoners of conscience.
- Urge the government of Eritrea to take steps to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression for all, including removing the requirement for religious organizations to register with the State and remove State intervention from the internal affairs and operations of religious organizations.
- Encourage the government of Eritrea to remove censorship of journalists and to allow for private media companies. All journalists imprisoned should be immediately released.